

Sudden Death of a Classmate and Friend

Adolescents' Perception of Support from their School

ATLE DYREGROV, ANNE MARIE BIE WIKANDER and
SYNNE VIGERUST

Center for Crisis Psychology, Bergen, Norway

ABSTRACT Following the accidental death of an 8th grade student, 26 classmates answered questionnaires after one and nine months. In addition, a qualitative interview was carried out with half the class and six close friends after one month. There was a strong positive endorsement of the school's response following the death. The students valued the opportunity to talk and take part in ritual activities. However, close friends from outside the dead boy's class went largely unnoticed, and assistance based on a better understanding of the grief hierarchy and identification of those who continued to react are recommended in order to counteract long-term problems.

Introduction

Estimates of the number of individuals who experience the death of a peer during adolescence vary from 36 percent to 87 percent (Oltjenbruns, 1996). Each year there are around 20,000 deaths of young people between the age of 10 and 19 in the US, with the three leading causes of death being accidents, homicide and suicide. These sudden deaths comprise more than 70 percent of all recorded deaths (Balk and Corr, 1996). In classrooms throughout the world, adolescents experience the loss of a classmate. Although our knowledge of children's and adolescents' grief reactions is mostly confined to reports on their experience following the death of a parent or a sibling, research is mounting on the

This study was supported by a grant from the Norwegian Council for Mental Health.

Address correspondence to: Atle Dyregrov, Center for Crisis Psychology, Fabrikkg. 5, N-5059 Bergen, Norway.

School Psychology International Copyright © 1999 SAGE Publications (London, Thousand Oaks, CA and New Delhi), Vol. 20(2): 191–208. [0143–0343 (199905) 20:2; 191–208; 006722]

effects of the loss of a friend, while research on classmates is lacking. Results show that the loss of a friend or classmate can lead to both short-term and long-term grief reactions (Podell, 1989; McNeil et al., 1991; Brent et al., 1993).

In the last decade there has been an increase in awareness of children in grief within the school system. Many schools have developed crisis contingency plans (Yule and Gold, 1993; Capewell, 1994; Dyregrov and Raundalen, 1994) and provide different services for classmates and friends after the death of a student. The plans vary in detail depending on the type of death, the age of the student and the school involved. The literature has primarily focused on ways to intervene following suicide, and several reports have assessed how adolescents perceive the help they receive. This article will focus on the dramatic accidental death of a classmate, and will describe how students evaluated the care they received from the school in the post-loss period.

The event

On Sunday 23 January 1994 Bergen, Norway was struck by the hardest storm in recent times. Although the population on the western coast of Norway is accustomed to winter storms, the power of this one was not predicted. It struck hard and suddenly and caused tremendous damage to the forests in and around Bergen, the second largest city in Norway. The material damage was extensive, but luckily no lives were lost, except for that of a 13-year-old boy. He lived in an apartment block but kept rabbits in a small cage nearby, and went to see to them, as he was afraid that the wind would damage their cage. He walked around a small playground, when a slide was taken by the wind and hit him on the back of his head and instantly killed him. No one saw what happened, and some of his friends found him. The storm and the death received major coverage in the media, but as they held back announcing the boy's name, most of his friends learned about the event through other friends either during the day of his death or the next morning at school.

Intervention

The community priest notified the dead boy's main teacher about the death on the morning of the next day. The priest gave an orientation to all teachers to ensure that they had a common platform from which to inform all students. The classmates of the dead boy found a notice (on a yellow notepad) on the door to the arts-room (where they had their first lesson) and were told to meet in their ordinary classroom. There the priest and their main teacher informed them. A candle was lit and placed on the dead boy's desk while some words of remembrance were spoken. The classmates put their chairs in a circle and talked about their reactions, their memories and their feelings. The priest and the main

Dyregrov et al.: Sudden Death of a Classmate and Friend

teacher facilitated the talking. Later the same day the class visited the scene of the accident in the company of some teachers and the priest. In retrospect the priest stated that more adults could have been present at this event. The classmates wrote letters of condolence to the boy's home, and they prepared words of remembrance which were printed in the city's major newspaper. Twice before the funeral the priest met with the class, informed them about the liturgy and discussed the role of the class in the funeral.

A remembrance ceremony for all the students at the school was held on one of the first days following the death. The principal and the main teacher spoke, a candle was lit by one of the classmates, there was a minute's silence, and the priest held a short service before they all sang 'Cumbaya my lord'. The priest talked about how to go on from that point, about coping and about openness. He informed them that following the funeral the flag would be hoisted to the top of the pole and they all would return to more ordinary schooldays, although the situation would be new and different. Before the start of the second week of schooling following the death, the dead student's chair and the candle in the classroom were taken away.

During the funeral, the priest read the words of remembrance printed in the newspaper. The class sat with two teachers, and they paraded by the coffin after the postludium and each student put a rose on the coffin. The main teacher was standing by the coffin while the students passed. Organ music was playing.

Only the dead student's class was given leave from the school to participate in the funeral, while other students needed a note from their home. The school's management was represented, and there were flowers from the school, the student council and the school municipality.

Method

Participants

The deceased boy's class consisted of 27 pupils of whom 26 agreed to participate in this study (13 of each gender). Their mean age was 14.2 years and they attended the 8th grade. In addition six of the boy's closest friends outside the class were included in the study (mean age = 13, all boys).

Procedure

The first author contacted the primary teacher in the boy's class to ask for permission to conduct a study to learn more about reactions following the death of a friend. The necessary permissions were asked for and given by the central school authorities and the school administration. Parents were informed and students gave written consent to the investigation.

One month following the event, two graduate students from the clinical psychology programme at Bergen University and the first author handed out questionnaires to the students in the class who were given one school-hour to complete it. One student declined to fill in the questionnaire, and one student did not want to be interviewed. In addition, the two psychology students conducted interviews with half of the classmates.

Nine months following the death we revisited the class and they filled in a questionnaire with some of the same questions as on the first questionnaire, including the two inventories mentioned below. In addition some new questions about changes in values and personal growth were included. The student who declined at time one filled in the questionnaire at time two. One student was absent on this second occasion.

Following the administration of the questionnaire, the class was given feedback on the results from the first questionnaire, and given the opportunity to discuss the results and ventilate other important themes. Finally, a meeting was held for the teachers and administration at the school, where they were informed of the results. Care was taken to secure anonymity.

Instruments

The first part of the questionnaire concerned demographic questions, and questions regarding previous losses, activities at the school following the death, and support from the school, family and friends. Most questions were structured, but some were open. The second part of the questionnaire assessed the degree of closeness that the students felt toward the deceased, asking them to state how close they felt to their dead friend and how much time they used to spend with him. The questions were partly based on those used in a study by McNeil et al. (1991). The third part assessed the immediate reactions when they learned about their friend's death as the students remembered them. These questions were developed for this study based on the first author's experience with grief and crisis reactions. Among reactions assessed were shock, unreality, disbelief, etc. The response categories ranged from 1 (not at all) to 4 (very much) (see Table 1).

The last part of the questionnaire consisted of two inventories. The Impact of Event Scale (Horowitz et al., 1979) and an adjusted version of the Hogan Sibling Inventory of Bereavement (Hogan, 1990; Hogan and Greenfield, 1991). A more detailed description of the inventories and the psychometric results is found elsewhere (Dyregrov et al., in press).

The 13 'closest' classmates were selected for interview. Closeness was determined on the basis of their own assessment of closeness. One boy regarded himself as a best friend of the dead boy, two boys

acknowledged being a very good friend and seven girls and eight boys acknowledged being a friend. Three boys and five girls reported not knowing him well.

The interview guide was developed on the basis of the research literature on adolescent grief and clinical experience from work with this age group. The interview guide had three parts. The first part focused on the history of the friendship, the second on the day they were notified about the death, and the third on the time that followed. Themes in this last part were friendships, loneliness, growth, support, beliefs about the future and existential questions. The themes were formulated as open questions, and the adolescents were stimulated to talk as freely as possible, in order to let them answer questions without being prompted.

Most interviews took place at the school, four at the first author's office and two in the adolescents' homes. The duration of the interview varied between 40 minutes and two hours, with a mean of one hour. All interviews were tape-recorded and transcribed. All interviews were conducted over four days. Responses to open-ended questions are presented as quotations to illustrate reactions.

Thirteen of the closest classmates of the deceased were interviewed, and six of the boy's closest friends outside the class.

Results

Participation in activities

All students reported that they had talked about the event in class, that they participated in the funeral, lit candles for the dead boy, talked with the priest in the class, visited the cemetery and wrote letters, poems, etc. which were given to the parents of the dead boy. In addition 92 percent (24) had been to the accident site, and 44 percent had written poems, compositions, etc. about what had happened. When asked in the questionnaire what else they had done at school or in the classroom, the students mentioned: the flag that was at half-mast, the picture of the boy and the flower that they placed on his desk, and that they hung remembrances on a board on the wall. The remembrances included his death announcement, the words of remembrance they had written to the newspaper, and some words of thanks from the mother.

Support from the school

In Table 1 the students' perception of support from the school is reported. Generally, the classmates had a very positive perception of the school's efforts to be supportive. There were a somewhat lower percentage of students at 9 months who were positively endorsing the school's support, but generally they remained positive. When asked about the school's

Table 1 *Perception of support from the school following the death of a classmate*

	<i>1 month</i>		<i>9 months</i>	
	<i>%</i>	<i>(N)</i>	<i>%</i>	<i>(N)</i>
Very good	69.2	(18)	50.0	(12)
Good	26.9	(7)	41.7	(10)
Not so good	3.9	(1)	8.3	(2)
Inadequate	0	(0)	0	(0)

follow-up procedures, 62 percent answered 'very good' and the rest (38 percent) answered 'good'. In response to an open question on the questionnaire about whether they thought something more should have been done from the school several students had comments:

This is very hard to answer. I think they have done a good job. It must be very hard for the school too. It must have been difficult to understand how we feel.

We should have talked a little more about him.

There should have been a picture of the boy present during the memorial.

I don't know. They could have arranged it so that the students could have talked to the priest alone, one at a time, if they felt they needed it.

During the *interviews* the classmates expressed a very positive perception of support from their main teacher, the priest and the school. When asked in what way she would advise those who are to help in a situation like this to give support, one student answered:

As our teacher did. She didn't break down, she was able to help and support us.

Interviewer: So it's important that the person that is to be of help is strong?

Student: Yes, but not too strong, one should be there with feelings as well.

Several students were concerned about the pressure on the teachers:

Our teacher has been marvellous. She had a lot of responsibility. It must have been very tough for her.

After nine months the following open-ended question was included in the questionnaire: What else do you think could have been done from the school? The answers were similar to those reported after one month, but some were more elaborate:

Dyregrov et al.: Sudden Death of a Classmate and Friend

That not only the main teachers, but also the other teachers show consideration and care. That we could visit his grave several times.

That other students could be informed on how they could talk to us who knew the boy.

The memorial decoration that we made for him that was hanging in the classroom before summer is now in a closet. Why? Have we forgotten him altogether? Maybe someone thinks that it hurts too much to be reminded all the time?

Friends outside the class

The group of friends outside the class was much more ambivalent in their perception of support from the school system. The friend who had found the dead boy had to inform his own class and felt that was very difficult to do:

My teacher asked me to tell, since I was in on discovering what had happened. It was the same questions they asked all the time.

Another close friend of the deceased boy, who first was informed about the death in the classroom the following day, experienced it in the following way:

He [the teacher] talked to the whole class. He only stated that he was dead and that he was sad for those who knew him. I had tears in my eyes, but I didn't start to cry. Then somebody said: 'Look at K.H.', and then several of my classmates turned around. The teacher asked if there was anyone who knew the boy, but then it was a bit hard to say that I knew him. I would rather be alone. I should have been at home that day, but I was there during the whole schoolday.

These friends also found that they were asked many questions, and that there was less opportunity to talk in the class. Four of the six friends outside the class stated that the school could have organized a meeting for friends of the deceased independently of the respective classes.

We could have done something together. We could have sat somewhere and talked with those who went to our school that had been classmates of him before. We could have gone to a room where we could have talked and didn't have to think about schoolwork. That was quite impossible. If we were to have a test that day, I couldn't concentrate.

Besides the problems already described, the friends were also excluded from some activities. They were not invited to visit the scene of the accident, and they were not active in any of the spontaneous rituals, or in making things for the bereaved family. One of them had problems getting leave from school to attend the funeral. Some found their own way of handling this:

School Psychology International (1999), Vol. 20(2)

We were not allowed to go to the place where he died, we had to do that afterwards. She said that if somebody wanted to go everyone would go, she had decided that no one should be allowed to do so. A few others and I went to a flower store. There we bought some flowers and then we went up to where the accident took place. It snowed a lot so we first went to the wrong place. It said in the newspaper that it was 11 metres from the kindergarten. But a friend of ours came and gave condolences and then we placed the flowers on the right place. We could see a little blood in the snow.

These friends felt more overlooked and their total impression of the school's helping efforts was not very positive. As one boy stated:

It was only those in the class that got attention. I knew him better than most of them. It was strange. It should have been done a little bit differently.

Talking about the death

Based on the interviews, more in-depth information on some important themes is reported. All students felt that it was important and meaningful that they were given the opportunity to talk together about the loss after they learned about the death:

Most of us cried and then there was much talking. It was very good to be together. First I wanted to go home and cry by myself, but I thought about it afterwards, that it was better to sit together like we did.

It was important that we could be together. It became easier than if we were to sit alone and think about it. We sat together and talked while we cried and shared all our thoughts. That made it much easier, even with the boys. Afterwards I felt that I knew my class much better.

Most students found it helpful to have the priest present:

The priest knew who he was. He had been in contact with his parents and his friends and it's important that he had that contact and that he knew how they felt. Then he could tell us what was important. We could also use him to tell things to the family, he could give them feedback. The mother was very glad of all the letters. We were told that she reads them now and then or looked at them and that she was thinking of us. I look forward to meeting her. She can tell us about him and then we can tell her of our experience. That's probably a bit important for her too. And it is important for us to meet her.

Some felt anger towards the priest:

I thought it unfair. I was angry with the priest . . . I couldn't understand how he [God] could do this towards A. I felt that God had taken the slide and just thrown it towards A.

Although the main teacher allowed the classmates to talk, other teachers were less permissive:

Dyregrov et al.: Sudden Death of a Classmate and Friend

The maths teacher is too eager for maths. He thought more about maths than the death. We had to say: 'We refuse to sit here and have maths, we can't concentrate. We need some time to talk.' It was like . . . we couldn't stand having ordinary school the first week at least.

There were several students, three or four of us that went to talk with the teacher and said we couldn't be in the class having ordinary mathematics. We had to leave. On one of the days after the death there was also a guy who was going to lecture. That was crazy, we couldn't sit and listen. It was about somebody who died of narcotics, and this person who talked hadn't heard anything about what happened. We just left. It was enough after what we had experienced. This was early in the week after the death.

In the interviews only a few of the students reported that they had talked with the teacher individually. When asked on the questionnaire whom they found easiest to talk with about the death, 80 percent answered a friend of the same sex, 7 percent answered a friend of the opposite sex and 13 percent their mother (only 15 of them answered this question).

Some students also found it hard to sit together talking about the loss as they found that this put pressure on them to show their reactions:

Everyone except me cried, I felt so stupid because everyone cried and I couldn't. I don't know what happened, I felt so . . . that I did not cry. The boys in class even cried. They sat behind me and just cried.

I couldn't sit in a circle, I didn't want to see everyone. I would have liked to sit at my own desk, we sat too tight. One girl who reacted very strongly was allowed to go to the library alone to talk a little with the teacher and the priest. I would have liked just to sit in the usual way and then the priest could stand in front of us and talk.

Visiting the scene of death

Visiting the scene of death was filled with mixed feelings:

We went to the accident site and found out exactly where it had happened. We made a cross from some wooden material we found up there.

It was awkward to be at the scene. I couldn't believe it. I couldn't understand how the slide had been taken by the wind. We went to see for ourselves. Most of us broke down and cried when we saw the slide. I cried a lot.

A friend outside the class expressed great distress over the fact that he was not allowed to go to the accident scene when he learned about it. He knew that the classmates got this offer and he felt it very unfair that he couldn't be part of this.

Rituals

Several classmates emphasized the importance of the rituals:

I really got the chance to take farewell with him when we lit a candle on his desk. That was very nice.

I sat and I looked at the candle and flowers when we were sitting in a circle, and then I could see the flag at half-mast outside. It was just beautiful.

The funeral was important in making the loss real:

When I walked to the coffin with the rose I felt very close to him and at the same time I knew that I would never see him again. It was hard to see how much the father and mother were hurting. It was like at that point I understood that he was dead. I saw the family and the coffin.

Others expressed that during the funeral they felt they could say goodbye:

I placed a rose on the coffin, and it was just like I said farewell to him. It's hard to explain. The rose will be cremated with the coffin. Then the rose and my goodbyes became a part of him in a way. It felt so good that the rose was together with him. The rose was in a way me and then I knew that he wasn't alone.

Although most students expressed gratitude over their involvement in the rituals, some felt they also should have been allowed to view the body:

The funeral was nice, but I wish I could have seen him when he lay in the coffin.

When asked specifically whether they would have liked to see him following the death, several were more uncertain:

I don't know, maybe it would have been too strong. But it would have been good too in a way.

I don't know if I would have liked to see him. I have never seen anyone dead so I don't know, I am not sure yet.

Interacting with other students

It was obvious from the interviews that many students (both classmates and close friends of the deceased) experienced problems in interacting with other students. Several mentioned hurtful comments from school-mates:

One boy said: 'A. is dead and that's cool. Now it will be more food for us when

Dyregrov et al.: Sudden Death of a Classmate and Friend

we cook at school.' I got so mad that I shouted at him that he must consider that he is dead and that he was killed. 'Yes, I know', he said and afterwards he said, 'I am sorry, I didn't know what to say'.

During the memorial in the gymnastic room some students didn't take it seriously. They sat and laughed and some even told jokes. It was probably because they didn't know him well, but it was . . . I think somebody even went to the funeral to escape school.

There were some friends of ours who didn't know what to do. They came over and said: 'We don't know what to say but we want to help.' That was very helpful. But some expressed stupid comments, and that was rather hard. I can't remember them in detail, but they laughed and said: 'How did he manage to get a slide in his head?' It was awful.

Some had suggestions on more active intervention from the teachers:

I don't think everyone understood. The day we had been to the funeral there were some nasty comments because we were well dressed: 'Hi tie boy'. I felt I wanted to go and hit them in the face. They could also have shown some consideration on the schoolbus for example. Many joked and laughed and didn't think at all on how we experienced that day. Maybe the teacher could have notified them that day and they could have shown us some more respect. Told them that we weren't in a joking mood, just that day. That was the worst day and I can't understand that they could do something like that.

Some felt their peers' behaviour was inappropriate or insensitive:

The church was filled with people and some even had to stand at the back. Some of his old friends, bullies I almost said, looked as if they didn't think about it at all. It didn't seem that it mattered for them. As soon as they got out of the church they started saying: 'Shall we go home to my place?' and things like that. They didn't seem to care about it.

Others commented on the complexity of this situation for others:

Some came and hugged us and that was very good. But some didn't know how to handle the situation. I felt sorry for them because I wouldn't have known how to handle it myself. There was much hugging and crying. Some came to us and said: 'We don't know what to say, this is so difficult'. I liked that. They had been told in the class that they shouldn't overlook us, but at the same time not be intrusive or talk too much about it. It must have been difficult for them. It is difficult when you are told 'not to talk too much about it' and 'do not overlook them', and so forth. It is hard to know what to do.

Effects on schoolwork

In Table 2 the student's responses to how the death had affected their schoolwork after one and nine months are reported. After one month less than a third report that it's harder to get the schoolwork done, few have

Table 2 *Effects on schoolwork*

	%	(N)
After 1 month:		
How is it with your schoolwork?		
easier than before	0	(0)
as before	73	(19)
harder to get done	27	(7)
much harder to get done	0	(0)
How is your concentration?		
very good	4	(1)
good	81	(21)
not good	15	(4)
bad	0	(0)
Have your schoolgrades changed?		
become better	11	(3)
as before	81	(21)
become worse	8	(2)
After 9 months:		
Do you experience that the death affects your schoolwork now?		
yes, very much	0	(0)
yes, much	4	(1)
yes, to some degree	20	(5)
no	76	(19)

problems with concentration, and the schoolgrades have mostly continued as before.

I've lost some of my concentration. I am more upset. When I am to do my homework I am not quite there. I am sitting and staring out of the window, thinking of other things. If I am asked a question I am somewhere else in my thoughts. If I look at his desk at school I start thinking for example: last time we had a maths test and we got it back I asked him what grades he got and he said: 'I'd rather not talk about it', and then he smiled. That's how I think when I look at his desk.

It is like I am sitting and looking at him, and he is sitting and looking out the window and the teacher asks him about his tasks and he can't answer because he has not done just that task.

Some students mentioned that returning to ordinary activities at school shortly after the loss helped them, but the feelings were mixed:

The fact that we soon started ordinary school made me forget faster. But it isn't like I want to forget the past either. I didn't walk around and think about it all the time, but the whole episode was so quickly past. Next day the whole

Dyregrov et al.: Sudden Death of a Classmate and Friend

class was crazy and threw things at each other. Everyone was sad one day and glad the next.

The interviewer: So you were in some ways made to forget?

Student: Yes, but in his class they had a picture on his desk. And they put a light and a flower there. But that was all. This was a bit too little if you ask me. They could have done more. (friend outside the class)

After nine months about a quarter (24 percent) of the classmates (see Table 2) reported that the death still affected their schoolwork, but not to a strong degree.

Symbolic situations at the school and days of remembrance

One student had to take over a symbolic 'role' from the dead boy. She was the first to sit at the boy's desk in class (they usually rotated places). She stated:

I sit at his desk now. It's very hard to sit here and think that he was the one who used to sit here. I didn't know what to do, but I couldn't . . . the desk could not stand empty for ever. I think a lot more about him. I just sit and . . .

Other students were also concerned about this and mentioned how hard it must have been for her.

After nine months we included two questions regarding the passing of anniversary dates, the dead boy's day of birth and death. Eighty-three percent of the students wanted to mark his birthday in the class, while 52 percent thought it was right to remember him in the class on the anniversary of his day of death. Regarding his birthday most students wanted to visit the grave. They mentioned lighting a candle, saying some words of remembrance and placing flowers on the grave as preferred activities.

Go to his grave with flowers.

Say a few words. Not sing (that would be too sad).

Talk about it and mention that it was his birthday.

For the anniversary date of his death, they mentioned the same activities, but in addition mentioned talking about him.

Discussion

Among the classmates of the boy who was killed, there was a strong positive endorsement of the school's response following the death. They found the opportunity to sit together and talk about what happened,

visiting the scene of death, participating in the funeral and other activities that the school initiated, helpful. The school had plans for reacting to an event like this, and with the help of the priest they rapidly instigated the follow-up. This system functioned well for the classmates in the short run, although the persistence of reactions over time (see Dyregrov et al., in press) suggested that several students needed more help to integrate what happened over time.

Close friends outside the class, however, felt much less cared for by the school system. They felt left alone or unjustly treated by the teachers. To some extent this shows that teachers did not have a thorough understanding of what it means to lose a friend, as friends outside the class became 'forgotten grievers'. The school system relied on its usual focus on the class, and did not have a structured approach that helped them identify students in a wider circle of friends who needed more follow-up. While the classmates had each other to talk with and belonged to a group that could support each other both when information about the death reached them and through the conversations and rituals in the class, the close friends outside the class lacked this belonging and felt much more alone. They also experienced the discrepancy between how they as grieving friends felt, and what their non-grieving classmates felt. This intensified their loneliness. These friends were not included in the activities organized for the classmates, and in many respects were not recognized as bereaved by the school.

The concept of grief hierarchy (Tyler and Gifford, 1991), if applied, would have helped the school to reach out to all the students in need. Such a hierarchy can be developed by asking classmates of the deceased and his/her family about who were his/her best friends. Without such an approach it is easy to overlook the students most in need of follow-up. Teachers of students high in the grief hierarchy (close friends) must be made more aware of the effects of such events on young people. Here this would have resulted in more sensitive handling of the death in the friends' classes, and a more caring attitude over time when the bereaved friends experienced problems in concentration or in completing work assignments. Some non-class friends experienced that their teachers attributed their need to go to the funeral, etc. as a form of malingering. We agree with Yule and Gold (1993) and Stallard and Law (1994) that there is a need to educate teaching staff about the nature and duration of the psychological effects of traumatic events. Although the affected school seemed well prepared and rapidly responded to the event, several teachers evidence a 'shallow' response.

The best friends in and outside the class may require special attention from school authorities. The school can activate them to help each other, by making it easy for them to come together in group sessions across class boundaries. This is even more important in the light of several studies

Dyregrov et al.: Sudden Death of a Classmate and Friend

that have shown that adolescents prefer to talk to their friends more than parents or adults following the loss of a friend (Gray, 1988; Balk, 1991; Schachter, 1991–2). Bereaved adolescents identify peers as the persons most able to provide unconditional support (Hogan and DeSantis, 1994). The students in this report also found it most easy to talk with friends (in particular same-sex friends). Although most students have the need to sit together and talk soon after the death, the need will be different over time, and later on group sessions can be scheduled for those who still feel affected by the loss.

Students experience talking in different ways and some may feel that the pressure towards showing reactions is too strong, especially if they do not react as the majority. Adult support personnel should be aware of this, and be sensitive to allowing the diversity of reactions as well as no reactions to be viewed as normal soon after a loss. With the increasing knowledge about the importance of letting young people sit together after traumatic events (Stallard and Law, 1994), it would have been helpful if the school had provided an opportunity for friends and classmates to meet over time. In this situation no school counsellor or mental health professionals were involved either at the time of death or later. Again based on the results from the follow-up at nine months (Dyregrov et al., in press) it seems likely that some of these students would have benefited from mental health assistance. After nine months, 46 percent of the students still reported that they thought it would take several years (8 percent) or they never would (38 percent) overcome the loss. The need for assistance seemed particularly high for some friends who were involved in finding the deceased.

It is important to be aware of the traumatic impact of losses such as the one featured in this article (Dyregrov, 1993). The loss happened in a sudden and very dramatic way. Some students found or came to the scene of death shortly after that and were exposed to strong sensory impressions. Those exposed to the trauma of finding or seeing the boy may be more in need of professional follow-up. It is easy for the school administration (and their response) to focus too much on the grief to the exclusion of the trauma of the situation. However, these students were not from the boy's class, and thus not prioritized in the school's response. Some of them even went to a different school, where a school response was totally absent. In a situation such as this, the administration at the dead student's school should take the responsibility to contact other schools where students high in the grief hierarchy attend. This will ensure that no friends go unnoticed.

The use of school counsellors and peer support groups has been reported to be helpful following adolescent loss (Gray, 1988; Swihart et al., 1992). In this situation the school psychologist or other professionals with a mental health background could have been available for indi-

vidual sessions, as used elsewhere after traumatic losses (e.g. Kneisel and Richards, 1988; Mauk and Weber, 1991). Capewell (1994) notes that schools are good at concrete action and planning, such as memorial services, but cope less well with emotional issues, except by referring students to counsellors or guidance personnel. The findings in this report agree with this observation.

The students may also have been helped by an increased focus on early psychoeducational information about the normality of different cognitive emotional and behavioural reactions. Especially emphasizing the normality of experiencing the presence of the dead person in the period after the loss would have been helpful. Seeing the dead person, hearing his/her voice, or just sensing the person's presence is not uncommon following a loss (see Silverman et al., 1992), but may be very frightening for those who experience this without any preparation. In the present situation one student became very upset and emotionally unstable after seeing his dead friend return in fantasy. In addition, when he told his classmates of this, many of them took this reaction to be a sign of illness or madness. A more formal classroom debriefing (Dyregrov, 1991), plus a follow-up debriefing with the presence of a mental health professional with a background from grief counselling could have prevented such problems. No mental health services were activated in this situation.

The classmates complained about hurtful comments and inappropriate behaviour from other students more distant from the dead boy. This was especially so during the memorial and funeral, but also during breaks at school. This parallels the findings from the grief literature in general, where bereaved people complain about the hurtful comments of others (Lehman et al., 1986; Range et al., 1992). Some students obviously tried their best to be of comfort, but were somewhat confused by the advice from their teachers, who told them to both make contact and let them be. Obviously teachers have an important task in providing more precise advice on how to behave towards classmates and friends. When such advice is given, it must consider that close friends may be present in the classes to be informed. In Norway few schools have been proactive in this regard, and there is a need for educating children and adolescents in how they can develop social skills in supporting a friend in need. In doing so the school system can foster resiliency and a nurturing environment for children and adolescents that help promote healthy grieving.

Although relatively few report major problems concerning their schoolwork on the questionnaire, the interviews reflected more problems in this domain. Both at home and at school a group of students felt it was hard to keep their thoughts on their schoolwork, as their thoughts were invaded by memories, or they just became lost in thoughts. About one-quarter of the students in this study experienced that the death affected

Dyregrov et al.: Sudden Death of a Classmate and Friend

their schoolwork nine months after the loss. Traumatic events and losses have been associated with scholastic impairment (Yule and Gold, 1993; Saigh and Mroueh, 1993, reported in Saigh et al., 1995; Stallard and Law, 1994) and teachers should identify these students to provide necessary support and advice to counteract long-term problems. It is easy to misattribute such problems to conscious laziness as Stallard and Law (1994) found, and a few of our students mentioned that they felt their teachers 'accused' them of malingering.

Conclusion

The classmates found the care and support they received from the school system and the local priest helpful. In spite of this, some students continued to experience much distress over time and would have benefited from more help. Using mental health professionals could have facilitated this help. It seems like the immediate response system of the school was well functioning, while long-term help and identification of those who continued to suffer over time were less developed. The friends outside of the dead boy's class went largely unnoticed. A system based on a better understanding of the grief hierarchy would easily have overcome this shortcoming.

Postscript

Following the passing of the fourth anniversary of the boy's death, the main teacher called the first author to tell him that most students in the class met on the grave on the anniversary date, and then went out for pizza afterwards. This had become a ritual each anniversary. Even though they had gone on to different schools, they still wanted to meet to commemorate the boy and they wanted their teacher to be present.

References

- Balk, D.E. (1991) 'Death, Bereavement, and College Students: A Description of Research at Kansas State University', paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Association for Death Education and Counseling, Boston, 6 March.
- Balk, D.E. and Corr, C.A. (1996) 'Adolescents, Developmental Tasks, and Encounters with Death and Bereavement', in C.A. Corr and D.E. Balk (eds) *Handbook of Adolescent Death and Bereavement*, pp. 3–24. New York: Springer.
- Brent, D.A., Perper, J.A., Moritz, G., Allman, C., Schweers, J., Roth, C., Balach, L., Canobbio, R. and Liotus, L. (1993) 'Psychiatric Sequelae to the Loss of an Adolescent Peer to Suicide', *Journal of the American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry* 32: 509–17.
- Capewell, E. (1994) 'Responding to Children in Trauma: A Systems Approach for Schools', *Bereavement Care* 13: 2–7.
- Dyregrov, A. (1991) *Grief in Children. A Handbook for Adults*. London: Jessica Kingsley.

School Psychology International (1999), Vol. 20(2)

- Dyregrov, A. (1993) 'The Interplay of Trauma and Grief', in Occasional Paper No. 8: *Trauma and Crisis Management*. Association for Child Psychology and Psychiatry Occasional Papers.
- Dyregrov, A. and Raundalen, M. (1994) *Sorg og omsorg i skolen*. Bergen: Magnat forlag.
- Dyregrov, A., Gjestad, R., Bie Wikander, A.M. and Vigerust, S. (in press) 'Reactions Following the Sudden Death of a Classmate'. *Scandinavian Journal of Psychology*.
- Gray, R.E. (1988) 'The Role of School Counselors with Bereaved Teenagers: With and Without Peer Support Groups', *The School Counselor* (January): 185–93.
- Hogan, N. (1990) 'Hogan Sibling Inventory of Bereavement', in J. Touliatos, B. Perlmutter and M. Strauss (eds) *Handbook of Family Measurement Techniques*, p. 524. Newbury, CA: Sage.
- Hogan, N.S. and DeSantis, L. (1994) 'Things that Help and Hinder Adolescent Sibling Bereavement', *Western Journal of Nursing Research* 16: 132–53.
- Hogan, N.S. and Greenfield, D.B. (1991) 'Adolescent Sibling Bereavement Symptomatology in a Large Community Sample', *Journal of Adolescent Research* 6: 97–113.
- Kneisel, P.J. and Richards, G.J. (1988) 'Crisis Intervention after the Suicide of a Teacher', *Professional Psychology: Research, Theory and Practice* 19: 165–9.
- Lehman, D.R., Ellard, J.H. and Wortman, C.B. (1986) 'Social Support for the Bereaved: Recipients' and Providers' Perspectives on What is Helpful', *Journal of Consulting and Clinical Psychology* 54(4): 438–46.
- McNeil, J.N., Silliman, B. and Swihart, J.J. (1991) 'Helping Adolescents Cope with the Death of a Peer: A High School Case Study', *Journal of Adolescent Research* 6: 132–45.
- Mauk, G.W. and Weber, C. (1991) 'Peer Survivors of Adolescent Suicide: Perspectives on Grieving and Postvention', *Journal of Adolescent Research* 6: 113–31.
- Oltjenbruns, K.A. (1996) 'Death of a Friend during Adolescence: Issues and Impacts', in C.A. Corr and D.E. Balk (eds) *Handbook of Adolescent Death and Bereavement*, pp. 196–215. New York: Springer.
- Podell, C. (1989) 'Adolescent Mourning: The Sudden Death of a Peer', *Clinical Social Work* 17: 64–78.
- Range, L.M., Walston, A.S. and Pollard, P.M. (1992) 'Helpful and Unhelpful Comments after Suicide, Homicide, Accident, or Natural Death', *OMEGA* 25: 25–31.
- Saigh, P.A., Mroueh, M., Zimmerman, B.J. and Fairbank, J.A. (1995) 'Self-efficacy Expectations among Traumatized Adolescents', *Behavior Research and Therapy* 33: 701–4.
- Schachter, S. (1991–2) 'Adolescent Experiences with the Death of a Peer', *OMEGA* 24: 1–11.
- Silverman, P.R., Nickman, S. and Worden, J.W. (1992) 'Detachment Revisited: The Child's Reconstruction of a Dead Parent', *American Journal of Orthopsychiatry* 62: 494–503.
- Stallard, P. and Law, F. (1994) 'The Psychological Effects of Traumas on Children', *Children and Society* 8(2): 89–97.
- Swihart, J., Silliman, B. and McNeil, J. (1992) 'Death of a Student: Implications for Secondary School Counselors', *The School Counselor* 40: 55–61.
- Tyler, M.P. and Gifford, R.K. (1991) 'Fatal Training Accidents: The Military Unit as a Recovery Context', *Journal of Traumatic Stress* 4: 233–49.
- Yule, W. and Gold, A. (1993) *Wise Before the Event. Coping with Crises in Schools*. London: Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation.